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# Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council

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## **Testimony of the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council to the Board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority on Proposed Fare Increases NY Marriott at the Brooklyn Bridge November 7, 2012**

Good Evening. My name is Matthew L. Kessler. I am the Vice-Chairman of the Long Island Rail Road Commuter Council (LIRRCC), the legislatively mandated representatives of the Long Island Rail Road, appointed by the Governor. I represent The Borough of Brooklyn on the Council.

This past week has been a very difficult one for commuters throughout the MTA region, especially in the LIRR service area. When many have lost so much, the issue of fare increases may seem trivial. Yet, proposed fare increases will affect riders long after we recover from the storm. Thus, we must speak out.

Not even two years since the last hearings and we encounter the same routine. Instead of discussing how to serve the customer better, grow ridership, and make the LIRR integral to Brooklyn, we speak about the narrow subject of how much more riders will pay.

It's important to understand how we got to this point. In 2009, an understanding was reached for riders, motorists, and the State to all contribute to resolve the MTA's financial crisis in exchange for no major service cuts. Subsequently, New York State took from the MTA's \$243 million in existing funding and service cuts soon followed. The problem is that the passengers kept up their end of the bargain, enduring fare increases that far exceeded the inflation rate.

As the representative of LIRR's Brooklyn riders, we oppose the proposed fare increase. This increase is unrealistically large and further shifts the burden of funding the MTA onto commuters. We understand that commuters need to share in supporting ever-increasing operating expenses, but MTA riders already bear a harsh burden that is increasingly beyond their means.

The LIRRCC knows that this Board is in a difficult position with rapidly increasing costs, some of which are beyond its control, such as debt service that compels the MTA to borrow heavily, in order to provide for the necessary replacement, rehabilitation, and expansion to the system. The MTA's current governmental funding will not grow enough to cover these increased costs, even with no repeat of State funding cuts.

Regardless, this Board needs to understand that LIRR commuters are also in an extremely difficult position. They are being stretched beyond their limits by commuting costs. The incessant fare increases are making commuters question the value of public transportation. Pretax dollars that were once available for decreasing commuting expenses has nearly been cut in half. Taxpaying commuters are being hammered from every direction from other MTA agencies and increased rates for station parking in many communities.

These riders find themselves being called upon to shoulder an ever heavier share of the operating costs of LIRR. In 2008 the proportion of operating expenditures borne by LIRR riders was 44.3 percent. This year, it is projected to be 47 percent.

We need to take action and do less talking, if we will implement equitable fare increases and find ways to lift some of this burden off the riders' shoulders.

We have a number of recommendations that we believe action must be seriously investigated:

1 - LIRRCC believes that all legitimate fare revenue must be collected and we have frequently and forcefully pressed LIRR to do so. With other funding sources constrained, riders pay in higher fares or reduced service for every dollar in fares that is not collected.

2 - MTA and LIRR must continue to seek increased efficiency and reduce costs. We demand that LIRR operations, as well as those of the MTA's other services, be streamlined. Let's find a better way, such as a prepaid longer term passes, and use the cost savings to reduce fare increases.

Let's also work together to find funding that doesn't depend on fares.

1 - Excess real estate. A primary example is the Great Neck Station. Significant funds were spent on renovation the area opposite the ticket office to serve as an information center on the Colonial Bridge Project. The Center was open for less than a week, and it has never reopened for any other purpose. Spaces like this are being wasted, as long as they are not being productively used, leased or rented.

2. Advertising. Increasing maximum use of space in and on stations and platforms could prove to be a source of increased revenue, particularly in Brooklyn where Atlantic Terminal serves as the gateway to the Barclays Center and other attractions.

3. New markets.

And, lastly and most importantly: thinking outside of the box. We must search for new and inventive revenue sources, try them, and implement those that are successful.

We all know that the taxes, fees, and other support that State and local governments provide for the MTA is not stable, reliable, and able to grow to meet increasing costs, so let's work with elected officials to revisit this funding formula.

What is gained by this fare increase? Depressed ridership. The LIRR at one time carried large numbers of daily riders within the Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, but as the fare increased within the City, passengers took notice and this ridership declined. This fare increase will not make the LIRR more attractive to those attending events in Brooklyn; instead of pushing them away, let's bring these potential new riders onto the system with a special "Fan Fare." There are limits on late night service to Atlantic Terminal and, when East Side Access opens, the end of the one seat ride for some and more difficult transfers for other Brooklyn passengers are planned., changes which we oppose. Brooklyn passengers have enough challenges; Let's do something positive for the Brooklyn riders.

Other fare issues depress ridership as well. Many families find using LIRR for weekend outings is likewise unaffordable, thus, LIRR receives no revenue from them. College students pay full undiscounted fares to travel to classes, even as they struggle to afford their education, so they find other options. Other transit systems in the country find ways to accommodate these riders for free, why can't we do so here?

We can't build an improved system by cutting service and raising fares. LIRR's leaders often speak of the East Side Access project and its ridership growth transforming the system and what it can provide to riders, but in reality we see an unwillingness to provide service for which there is demand, and a fare structure that sends a powerful message not to use the LIRR unless there is no alternative. To approve this proposal is to continue down this road, and we urge this Board to follow a new path.